

Summing Up the Fur Strike

On June 19, 1929, the New York furriers' strike began under the direction of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. The Daily Worker of June 20, carried an eight-column headline: "Furriers General Strike Cripples the Industry. Thousands of Workers in Response to Call on the First Day of Struggle". Five weeks later, in an obscure corner of the Daily Worker the announcement was published that the strike had been called off without a successful conclusion.

THE FAILURE TO ESTIMATE THE DEFEAT

One would imagine that when two fights in as many months in the New York needle trades (cloakmaker's strike and furriers' strike) have resulted in two decisive defeats for the Left wing and big gains for the Right wing, the Daily Worker would attempt to make an analysis and draw the proper lessons and conclusions. But not so much as an editorial was written on the matter. The Joint Board of the Union, however, did make a statement pretending to estimate the situation and analyze the shortcomings of the furriers' strike which resulted in such a mortifying defeat for the Left wing. But its statement (Daily Worker, July 24-25, 1929) has no value. It analyzes nothing. It finds nothing wrong with the policies of the Union, but plenty wrong with the ranks of the workers who are filled with "pessimism... fear of right wing terrorism... passive." The statement fails to explain why it is that the Left wing which, as late as 1927-28, had a position in the needle trades vastly superior to that of the Right wing, is today no longer followed actively by the majority of the workers; it fails to explain why, to limit ourselves here to the furriers' strike, the workers followed the orders of the employers and the Right wing and remained at work. The Left wing in the needle trades is today weaker than at any previous time in the last five years or more of its history and the reasons for its defeats and weakness must be made plain. A genuine explanation of the recent defeats of the Left wing is imperative, for without it there will be further, more crushing defeats for the Left and progress of the Right wing at the expense of the workers involved.

1. The calling and the calling-off of the furriers' strike were conducted irresponsibly. There was no preparation for the strike. This is virtually admitted when the Joint Board statement says that the workers in the Associated (the manufacturers) shops did not join the strike. These workers are the decisive factor in the industry and are still under the control of the Right wing. Of the 2,000 to 2,500 workers who went out on strike—a meaningless minority of the workers in the New York trade—a large percentage of them were already unemployed.

FOSTER ON RETREATS

The strike was visibly lost in the first week, and all the workers realized it. A responsible leadership would have acknowledged the situation and known how to retreat in time in order to conserve its forces for a new struggle. But the opportunist group whom the Stalinists have put in control of the union, Gold, Zimmerman, Wortis and Co., compelled the strike to drag on until it was beyond exhaustion, rather than admit their failure and mistakes. Only after five weeks was the strike "officially" called off in an out-of-the-way corner of the Party Press. Such a leadership and policy can teach the workers nothing. It has nothing in common with militant unionism; it is reactionary and irresponsible. No less an authority than William Z. Foster once said:

"A common mistake of reactionaries, in case of a lost strike, is not to officially call off the strike. They usually let it drag along interminably, long after it has ceased to exert real pressure against the employers. The consequence is that many loyal workers, who have fought valiantly while there was even a slight chance to win the strike, are forced back to work with the odium of scab upon them. They then are largely lost to the trade union movement. A far more intelligent course is to call off the strike officially when it is manifestly lost, and let the fragments of the defeated army go back to work with honor. It facilitates greatly the reorganization of the workers. It is an important detail in developing an organized retreat."—(Strike Strategy, page 83-4).

That was once. Now Foster, who is in charge of the Party's trade union work, is a silent accomplice to the methods he once condemned.

2. The workers are losing faith in the leadership of the Left wing, not because it follows out the Left wing policy, but because it does not carry it out. The Golds and Zimmermans are shouting very radical phrases today, but only so as to cover up their Right wing acts. In 1927, Gold and his fellow opportunists ended the furriers' strike with such a collaborationist agreement that the National Committee of the Young Workers League had to repudiate it publicly in part. In 1929, the agreement made with the bosses in the dressmakers' strike, led by the Left wing union, was so little different from a typical Sigman-Schlesinger-Dubinsky settlement that the T.U.E.L. had to con-

demn it semi-officially in an article by Philip Aronberg in Labor Unity. The Left wing fought Sigman for his class-collaborationism, for his "impartial arbitrators"; but the Left wing dressmakers' agreement called for the same kind of "impartial" arbitration. It also "forgot" the question of week work, instead of piece work. It failed to make the jobbers responsible for the workers employed by the contractors. The militancy of the workers—not of the leaders—was the only thing to distinguish the strike from one managed by the Right wing.

NEW UNIONS AND THE COMMUNISTS

The Left wing has not made the mass of the workers feel at home in the new union. The Party hugs the new union to death. It is so fearful of losing its grip that it establishes a devitalizing mechanical control in the organization. Only Party members—and often only members of a certain Party faction—are entrusted with responsible offices. Non-Party workers who are most sympathetic with the Left wing are looked upon with suspicion and are alienated. The workers get the feeling that they are merely instruments for maneuvering from the outside, instead of feeling the healthy influence and dominance of Communist ideas acquired by daily experience and intelligent guidance. The Left

FROM GOMPERS TO STALIN

(The evolution of William Z. Foster)

(In previous issues of The Militant we have given the political biographies of a number of the Party leaders—Lovestone, Pepper, Wolfe, etc.—who had charge of the slander campaign against the Opposition Communists. The removal from leadership of this shady crew has been followed by the appointment of others, with Foster as the chief, and the latter, after a long silence, has begun to hurl the words "counter-revolutionist" and "renegade" at the opponents of Stalinism. In order that his qualification for this occupation may be established, we print here some facts about his record which are certified correct by Foster himself, by Gompers and Fitzpatrick. The material printed below consists of extracts from the published stenographic record of the Senate investigation of the Steel Strike in 1919. The published volume is entitled: "Investigation of Strike in Steel Industries. Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor, United States Senate—Sixty-sixth Congress, first session. Pursuant to S. Res. 202 on the Resolution of the Senate to investigate the Strike in the Steel Industries"

It would not be necessary to bring this record to public notice again were it not for the fact that only by a study of Fosters' past can his present Centrist fight against the revolutionary line of Opposition be explained.)

FOSTER AND GOMPERS

FITZPATRICK. He (Foster) is not preaching and is absolutely confining himself to the activities and scope of the American Federation of Labor, and has done so for the years that I have known him. This is not a new thing for me. I have known Foster for probably six or seven years. (Page 75).

THE CHAIRMAN. Have you ever discussed this book (Syndicalism) with him at all?

MR. FITZPATRICK. Oh, he joked about the views he had in his younger days, when he associated with men who were actuated with radical thoughts, and he was imbued by it, but when he got both his feet on the ground and knew how to weigh matters with better discretion and more conscience, he had forgot all of those things that he learned when he was a boy, and is now doing a man's thinking in the situation. (Page 76).

GOMPERS: About a year after that meeting at Zurich—no, about two years after the Zurich meeting, (where Foster had appeared as an International delegate of the I. W. W.—Ed.) and about a year after that pamphlet ("Syndicalism") had been printed, I was at a meeting of the Chicago Federation of Labor, conducted under the presidency of Mr. John Fitzpatrick. I was called upon to make and did make an address. One of the delegates arose after I had concluded and expressed himself that it would be wise for the men in the labor movement of Chicago and of the entire country to follow the thought and philosophy and so forth which President Gompers had enunciated in his address. I did not know who was the delegate. He was a new personality to me. I might say that I was rather flattered and pleased at the fact that there was general comment of approval of not only my utterances but of the delegate who had first spoken after I had concluded.

Much to my amazement, after the meeting was over I was informed that the delegate was W. Z. Foster, the man who had appeared in Zurich and the man who had written that pamphlet. I think I addressed a letter to him expressing my appreciation of his change of attitude, his change of mind, and pointing out to him

wing union has not the rank and file control it needs: even the shop-delegate system was given an icy reception at the union's foundation convention. The atmosphere in and about the union is more that of a political Party than a trade union sympathetic to the revolutionary movement.

Is it to be wondered that there is passivity, disillusionment, pessimism, and absence of spirit among the workers?

3. In the furriers' strike, as in the cloakmakers', the Left wing nonchalantly threw overboard the powerful slogan of Unity. There was no agitation among the workers in the Right wing union—which, unfortunately, is gaining in members because of the mistakes by the Left—for joint action, struggle, strike against the growing impudence of the bosses and the increasingly rotten conditions suffered by the workers.

The yellow Forward writes that the reason for the defeat of the Left wing in the cloakmakers' strike was that in past years the workers were deceived (!) by the Left wing's cry for unity, but now the Communists have even dropped this cry and the workers are turning back to their tried (!) leaders. Analyzed properly, the words of the Forward should be a source of instruction for the Left wing. It is the Forward and its whole tribe that gain when the Left wing pursues an incorrect policy, when it abandons the struggle for unity. That is why we shall continue to hammer at these truths.

that pursuing a constructive policy he could be of real service to the cause of labor. He was a man of ability, a man of good presence, gentle in expression, a commander of good English, and I encouraged him. I was willing to help build a golden bridge for mine enemy to pass over. I was willing to welcome an erring brother into the ranks of constructive labor. (Pages 111-112).

FOSTER: I am one who changes his mind once in a while. I might say that other people do. I shook hands with Gustave Herve in La Sante Prison. At that time he was in there for anti-militarism and for preaching sabotage, and today I think Gustave Herve (Herve had turned Socialist Patriot—Ed.) is one of the biggest men in France—Page 396).

THE CHAIRMAN (To Foster): But at that time, when you were advocating the doctrines of the I. W. W. through the country and abroad, you were running counter to the policies of the American Federation of Labor?

FOSTER: Yes, sir.

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Gompers, however, has not changed his views concerning the I. W. W., but your views have changed?

FOSTER: I don't think Mr. Gompers views have changed—only to become more pronounced, possibly.

CHAIRMAN: And you say now to the Committee that your views have so changed that you are in harmony with the views of Mr. Gompers?

FOSTER: Yes, sir, I don't know that it is 100 percent, but in the main they are. (Page 423).

FOSTER AND THE WAR

SENATOR WALSH: What was his attitude toward this country during the war, if you know?

MR. FITZPATRICK: Absolutely loyal, and he did everything in his power to assist in every way. I worked with him. I worked with him during the whole of the war, and I know the service that he rendered to the country. I think that he rendered as great a service, not only to the United States Government, but to the Allies, as any man. (Page 75-76).

SENATOR WALSH (to Foster): What was your attitude toward this country during the war?

FOSTER: My attitude toward the war was that it must be won at all costs.

SENATOR WALSH: Some reference was made by Mr. Fitzpatrick about your purchasing bonds or your subscribing to some campaign fund. Do you mind telling the committee what you did personally in that direction?

FOSTER: I bought my share, what I figured I was able to afford, and in our union we did our best to help make the loans a success.

WALSH: Did you make speeches?

FOSTER: Yes, sir.

WALSH: How many?

FOSTER: Oh, dozens of them.

WALSH: I would like to have you, for the sake of the record, tell us how many speeches you made, what time you devoted, and what money you expended for bonds, for the Red Cross or for any other purposes.

FOSTER: Well, I think I bought either \$450 or \$500 worth of bonds during the war. I cannot say exactly.

WALSH: You made speeches for the sale of bonds?

FOSTER: We carried on a regular campaign in our organization in the stockyards.

WALSH: And your attitude was the same as the attitude of all the other members of your organization?

FOSTER: Absolutely. (Pages 398-399).